# The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future

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# The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future

*by LeiLani Nishime*

*Abstract: Applying the literature of passing to cyborg cinema makes visible the politics of cyborg representations and illuminates contemporary conceptions of mixed-race subjectivity and interpolations of mixed-race bodies. The passing narrative also reveals the constitutive role of melancholy and nostalgia both in creating cyborg cinema and in undermining its subversive potential.*

> Simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false," between "real" and "imaginary."
>
> Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations"[1]
>
> Blue Fairy, please, please make me real.
>
> David, *A.I.* (Steven Spielberg, 2001)

Cyborgs are hybrids of humans and machines, a mix of organic and inorganic. They are boundary crossers that inspire fascination and dread. They are, in the words of Donna Haraway, "monsters."[2]

While cyborgs are part of our everyday reality (users of artificial hearts, virtual-reality visors, and cell phones), they also exist in the realm of the imaginary. They reside in the liminal, in-between spaces that survive at the borders and frontiers of the social order. They subvert the dream of purity and offer instead a future of mutual contamination. If, as Jennifer González claims, the anxieties and fantasies of a culture are projected onto the image of the cyborg, then the cyborg must be read as a powerful metaphor for the historical bogeyman of contamination—racial mixing.[3]

By applying the literature of mixed-race criticism and "passing" to cyborg cinema, the political nature of the representations of cyborgs becomes visible. At the same time, reading cyborgs as displaced representations of mixed-race people illuminates the ways in which we currently conceive of mixed-race subjectivity and interpolate mixed-race bodies. The passing narrative also reveals the constitutive role of melancholy and nostalgia both in creating cyborg cinema and in undermining its subversive potential.

Haraway's use of the term "monsters" is instructive given the monster's central place in the horror/science fiction genre. Although the majority of critical work

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has read the monstrous creatures that populate horror and science fiction as female Others, some critics, most notably Isabel C. Pinedo, have argued that the monster in horror films can be read as a "racial or ethnic Other."[4] Within the generic logic of horror and science fiction, these Others must be expelled or destroyed to restore the status quo. It follows that films in these genres can also be read as simple expressions of racism or xenophobia as they seek to reinforce and solidify differences.

With the increasing prevalence of the cyborg, a new sort of monster has emerged, the *mulatto cyborg*.[5] J. P. Telotte asserts that early science fiction was mainly concerned with drawing a line between human and machine.[6] In contrast, contemporary science fiction exploits the figure of the cyborg in order to interrogate and break down the distinctions between the human and the artificial, between machine and nature.

As a hybrid, the cyborg is not completely the Other. Rather, its narrative power comes from its ability to blur boundaries by blending the Other and the human. As Vivian Sobchack has pointed out, science fiction is preoccupied with the relationship between the strange and the familiar.[7] This uncanny mixture infects the portrayal of both mixed-race people and cyborgs. It is only a short leap, then, to read anxieties about the incoherence of the body of the cyborg as a parallel to the confusion and concern that centers on the body of the multiracial human.

In many ways, science fiction films seem to be the perfect genre for exploring mixed-race representations and subjectivity. Echoing Telotte, genre historian Steve Neale locates the unease these films elicit even more specifically in their obsession with the meaning of the term "human." As Neale argues, "The boundaries of the human and issues of difference they raise necessarily include issues of sexuality, ethnicity, and gender."[8] To this list, we can add the issue of racial mixing.

Western culture's long history of equating human with white European suggests that the admixture of human with Other in the cyborg finds its closest racial parallel in the mixed-race body. The same dehumanizing logic that justified slavery and colonialism also fueled the belief that different races constituted entirely different species. In fact, some speculated that the offspring of people of different races would be sterile. For much of the modern era, mixed-race people were the living embodiment of crossed boundaries, not simply social but biological as well.

González concludes her article with a reflection on the similarities in the language used to describe cyborgs and mixed-race people. Terms such as "miscegenation" and "illegitimate" abound. González's article comes closest to my project here, and I would like to pursue her observations further. Rather than gesture toward race as a parallel construction of either gender or sexuality, I would like to place race front and center as a central metaphor and as a constitutive, if unconscious, narrative of cyborg cinema.

There was a sharp increase during the 1980s and 1990s in the number of cyborg-themed films, from *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982) and *Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992) to, more recently, *A.I.* (Steven Spielberg, 2001) and *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2003).[9] These movies coincided with a marked demographic shift toward mixed-race relationships and multiracial offspring. Thus, the shift from

representations of the robot to more of the cyborg that Telotte described is reflective of a broader social change. Earlier, the marauding robot of *Hidden Planet* (Fred McLeod Wilcox, 1956) chasing the blonde starlet played out fears about miscegenation. Later, the "skin jobs" of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), who try to pass as human, darkly mirrored concerns about reading the multiracial body.

The roster of recent Hollywood films suggests that miscegenation and multiraciality are not as much a societal concern as they used to be. After all, even George Bush Sr. has "little brown ones" in his family. Correspondingly, with the rare but notable exception of a few independent films such as *Fakin' the Funk* (Timothy A. Chey, 1997) and *Black & White* (Yuri Zeltser, 1998), the race film seems to have fallen out of favor. Even when biraciality does appear as an issue, it is a relic of a bygone era, as in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Carl Franklin, 1995). Whether this silence is due to the unpopularity of issue films in general or the creeping ideology of colorblindness, the issues surrounding multiraciality have moved off the radar screen. But, while Hollywood films may be silent, tabloids, magazines, and fan sites are not. Witness the oft-repeated story of Halle Berry, who grew up with a white mother and an absent black father, or the hue and cry over Mariah Carey's "outing" by the tabloid and legitimate press.[10] And, of course, there are the longstanding discussions about Michael Jackson's supposed attempts to pass as white. In each case, there is anxiety over the blurring of racial categories and classifications that belies the cinema's apparent silence concerning such issues.

In fact, the movies have not been silent. They have simply rewritten the terms of the race debate and have taken cover under the umbrella of generic imperatives. The cyborg offers a safe space in which to explore the controversial issues surrounding multiracial identity. The destabilization and undermining of racial categories that accompany racial mixing may be too threatening to challenge explicitly. By displacing race onto cyborgs and setting them in a fantastic world of flying cars and floating noodle shops, filmmakers and film viewers are able to disavow the racial subtext. The gleaming surface of science fiction conventions deflects criticism so that the unspoken assumptions that govern the ways in which we conceptualize and react to the "problem" of multiraciality rise to the surface.

Just as science fiction conventions can camouflage the racial subtext of cyborg cinema, so too the elimination of race from critical analysis can evacuate political content. Reading race back into cyborg films gives us a chance to release cyborg cinema from its postmodern ghetto. While much is made of the postmodern nature of the cyborg film and its challenges to the distinctions between human and machine, critical analysis usually ends there,[11] as if destabilizing this difference were in and of itself subversive.

Although such deconstruction constitutes an important first step in analysis, it does not address the hierarchy of machine and human. Nor does deconstruction take into account the emotional impact of challenging racial difference. By questioning distinctions between man and machine, cyborg cinema asks the viewer to recognize that neither human nor machine is the true origin of selfhood and identity. This does not necessarily create a structure of equivalence. On the contrary, the loss of boundaries and origins inspires a conservative turn to nostalgia and melancholy.

Many cyborg films, despite their acknowledgment of the hazy boundary between man and machine, continue to recenter humans as the exclusive producers of meaning. The political implications of this reversion become visible through the recognition of these films' symbolic references to the Other, thus yielding a more nuanced and politically significant understanding of the use of the cyborg in contemporary cinema.

**The Good, the Bad, and the Mulatto Cyborg.** Cyborg representations in the past twenty years can be divided into three broad categories: those about (1) "bad cyborgs," (2) "good cyborgs," and (3) "mulatto cyborgs." Each category has a corresponding racial formation that inscribes the cyborg into a comprehensible narrative.[12] As Hazel Carby has argued in her work on the Afro-American woman novelist, the narrative figure of the mulatto is both a vehicle to explore race relations and an expression of that relationship.[13] That relationship is constantly in flux, however, so that competing conceptions of race are likely to be at play at the same time and even in the same film.

Films focusing on bad cyborgs are the most popular, most traditional, and least complex of the cyborg movies. The bad cyborg plays on xenophobic fears of mechanical domination, inviting the audience to recoil from the bodily invasion of machine into man. Like the segregationists of both the far right and the far left, these films strive to reassert clear distinctions and absolute differences. As Scott Bukatman argues in his work on science fiction, "Like the Terminator himself, the utopian promise of the science fiction film—the superiority of the human—may be battered and beleaguered, but it is still there."[14] In films in this category, biology is destiny.

Films about good cyborgs are both more progressive and more disturbing. The cyborgs in these films have become the darlings of academic criticism. The films that feature good cyborgs radically destabilize the human/machine dichotomy. Their liberal humanist take on the cyborg presumes a self that is beyond the body, a disembodied spirit that can reside in either human or machine. This understanding flattens out differences that become reanimated once a racial metaphor is reintroduced. For the good cyborg, biology is irrelevant.

Finally, the mulatto cyborg, like the good cyborg, dismantles the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic. But unlike that disembodied creature, the mulatto remains tied to a particular material existence. Mulatto cyborgs most closely align with the posthumanist point of view.[15] In films with mulatto cyborgs, biology may not be real but it is always relevant.

**The Bad Cyborg.** Science fiction films are awash in bad cyborgs. While they are the most populous and popular of cyborg representations, they are also falling out of favor as "kinder, gentler" cyborgs become more dominant. Yet these earlier and cruder portrayals clearly demonstrate the staying power of biologically essentialist beliefs even in the most postmodern of films.

Both *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) challenge conventional filmmaking in many ways, yet both feature cyborgs that revert to earlier robotic conceptions of artificial life, reasserting clear distinctions

between human and machine. In a tradition that goes back as least as far as the fembots of TV's *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1973–74), bad cyborgs are revealed as machines in visually shocking, climactic moments. The viewer, who has become accustomed to a character with a human face, is suddenly confronted with the mechanical infrastructure that lies just beneath the skin. The impact is multiplied by the viewer's extratextual familiarity with the actors playing these roles. When Ash (Ian Holm) in *Alien* is revealed to be a cyborg, the audience is treated to shots of milky-white fluid spurting out of his head as it explodes. And when Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator emerges from a fireball toward the end of that film, he is only partially covered in skin; his metal skeletal frame is joined to the burned remains of the international star. This is Freud's uncanny in the extreme. The normally calm tones of Holm's persona are at odds with the vision of his disembodied head extruding multiple wires while he speaks to the main character, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver).

In both *Alien* and *The Terminator*, the audience is made to understand that no matter how human the cyborgs may seem, they are actually machines. As Forest Pyle notes, "[*The Terminator*] proceeds to unmask the cyborg, to reveal visually that the semblance is indeed an illusion, that beneath the flesh and bone there is nothing human."[16] The split is complete since humanity is, literally, only skin deep. Within a cultural logic that equates human with white European, this simplistic conception of cyborgs most closely follows the infamous "one-drop" rule. Viewing race in absolutist terms, this decree legally set the southern definition of African American at one drop of black blood. One was either black or white; one could not, as with the more "generous" one-sixteenth rule, which designated anyone who was more than one-sixteenth African American as unambiguously black, move back and forth between the two terms in successive generations. No matter how white (read human) one may have appeared, one's essence remained unchanged.

These versions of cyborgs replay anachronistic fears of miscegenation in another key way: the cyborgs' plan for the violent and absolute overthrow of humanity echoes the most extreme segregationist rhetoric. Fears about a cyborg invasion appear in some of the first cyborg movies, such as *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973) and that feminist classic *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975), but while earlier cyborgs are simply tools of their human instigators, more recent versions situate the threat in the cyborgs themselves.

One of the most pervasive cyborg representations in the popular imagination is the Borg of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94). The Borgs' catch phrase, "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile," has entered the popular lexicon, and Borgs are featured characters in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* movie. In a series of *Star Trek* TV episodes, the Borgs capture Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart), fit him with a mechanical prosthesis, and incorporate him into a Borg's consciousness. The Borgs think and act as one, and their main goal as a race is to incorporate as many other species as possible. In this case, the merger of human and machine does not result in a synthesis but in the suppression of the human. As in the one-sixteenth rule, the racial Other dominates racial categorization. After all, being one-sixteenth Caucasian does not make an

African American white. A machine, like race, can corrupt the supposed purity of whiteness/humanness. Thus, in the rhetoric of racial separatists, such a mixture can only be read as loss.

There is one way in which the bad cyborg can be redeemed: by sacrificing of himself and his kind to humans. The cyborgs of both *The Terminator* and *Alien* come back reformed and domesticated in the sequels. The killer cyborg of the first Terminator film returns to aid the heroine, Sarah Conner (Linda Hamilton), and her son, John Connor (Edward Furlong), and by willingly submerging himself in molten metal insures the future of the human race. If this were not enough, like La Malinche of early American colonialism, the cyborg's death helps doom his fellow cyborgs, who would have savagely ruled the earth.[17]

In *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), Bishop (Lance Henrickson), who replaces the evil cyborg, Ash, of the first film, like the Terminator sacrifices himself for more clearly deserving humans. In the movie's reactionary final scene, the nuclear family is restored with Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) as the mother, Newt (Carrie Henn) as the child, and Hicks (Michael Biehn) as the father. An ever-loyal remnant of Bishop is there as the faithful family dog.

Despite arguments by critics such as Constance Penley that films such as *Aliens* and the first *Terminator* destabilize the man-versus-machine opposition,[18] I agree with Pyle, who argues that "if the film displays the thorough interpenetration of human and machine or depicts their hybridization, its narrative logic is bent upon fulfilling humanist fantasy, that of human mastery over the machine."[19]

**The Good Cyborg.** Like the redeemed cyborgs discussed above, the good cyborg does not want to eliminate humans. He wants to be human. Neither human nor machine, he is doomed to an eternal search for belonging. Two of the more compelling examples are the replicants in *Blade Runner* and David in the Spielberg-Kubrick collaboration, *A.I.* Both creatures are examples of a crucial subset of cyborgs, androids. Cyborgs may exist at the edges of both human and machine, but androids occupy the farthest reaches of the category of cyborgs. As completely synthetic beings, androids can hardly be called cyborgs at all, since they do not physically meld human and machine. However, androids are not merely glorified appliances; rather, they are autonomous beings who gain experience and, in many representations, feel emotions and pain.

More than any other kind of cyborg, androids force the question of what defines someone as human. Does the definition go beyond biology? Does it reside in the spirit or the soul? Can those ineffable but defining qualities exist in machines? In the same way, when one "passes" for white, all racial categories come into question. If race is biological, a matter of hair and skin, then what happens when one's physical characteristics most closely resemble those of the members of another race? Of course, if race is some unalterable essence, then how is passing possible at all? What then is that essence?

Although passing may undermine essentialist notions of race and difference, it simultaneously highlights and reinforces that difference. After all, a racial line must exist for one to cross it, and like the heroes and heroines of classic passing

narratives, the good cyborgs of these films are all punished for their trespasses. The replicant outlaws of *Blade Runner*, like the cyborgs of *Alien* and the Terminator films, all die or are killed, and the cyborg stars of *Blade Runner* and *A.I.*, Rachael (Sean Young) and David (Haley Joel Osment), are both driven out and exiled forever. In the original release of *Blade Runner*, Deckard (Harrison Ford) and Rachael escape to an idyllic countryside that is, nevertheless, outside society, while *A.I.*'s David ends up at the bottom of the ocean with only a robotic teddy bear as a companion. So, although the good cyborg may dream of the liberal humanist's malleable, disembodied self, he awakens to a criminalized body.

The good cyborg perfectly replicates the stereotype of the tragic mulatto/a. From the early slave spirituals, to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), to Nella Larson's 1929 novel, *Passing*, to the film *Imitation of Life* (John Stahl, 1934; Douglas Sirk, 1959), the figure of the tragic mulatto/a has dominated portrayals of mixed-race people. As Barbara Christian describes the tragic mulatta in her work on black women novelists, "Often she is shown as caught between two worlds, and since she is obviously the result of an illicit relationship, she suffers from a melancholy of the blood that inevitably leads to tragedy."[20] While the good cyborg differs from the tragic mulatto in a key way, it is instructive to first recognize the startling similarities in their representations. In particular, the good cyborg and the tragic mulatto are both haunted by the melancholia that Christian has discussed.

The film that most closely develops the tragic mulatto motif is also the one that is nearest and dearest to the hearts of critical theorists: *Blade Runner*. This story of a dystopic future of unending rain and synthetic pets reaches as far back as Francis Harper's *Iola LeRoy* (1895) to create its tragic cyborg heroine. Like that novel's eponymous mulatta who passes for white, Rachael in *Blade Runner* is beautiful, refined, and almost indistinguishable from a human. Also, like Iola, she accidentally discovers the truth of her parentage and is plunged into despair. For all her attempts to pass, it seems that blood will tell.

The other cyborgs in *Blade Runner* map easily onto classic mulatto stereotypes. Besides Rachael, who resembles the middle-class, mixed-race characters depicted during the Harlem Renaissance, *Blade Runner* features four other replicants. Former slaves, these cyborgs have rebelled and come to earth in search of their creator. Christian describes similar characters in the abolitionist literature of the 1800s.[21] The most famous of these works, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, features mixed-race slaves who resist Anglo-Saxon rule. Since abolitionists often argued that African Americans were essentially passive, mixed-race characters were used to explain the restiveness of slaves searching for freedom. As in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other abolitionist novels, the newest generation of replicants in *Blade Runner* had to be "retired" because their responses were becoming too human and they were no longer willing to submit to life as slaves in the colonies.

It is not too great a leap to view *Blade Runner* as a passing film and to see it as part of a longer American racial narrative. As Elaine Ginsberg asserts in her introduction to her book *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*:

> The genealogy of the term *passing* in American history associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent "white" identity

by an individual culturally and legally defined as "Negro" or black. . . . As the term metaphorically implies, such an individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary—indeed *trespassed*—to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other.[22]

Whether consciously or unconsciously, all the cyborgs in *Blade Runner* attempt to pass as human. This narrative provides an important interpretive frame by which to understand the relationship between human and machine expressed in the film.

Given the sheer volume of material about *Blade Runner*, it is surprising how few critics read race into the movie. Two of the most compelling racial readings come from the cultural critic Brian Carr and the film theorist Kaja Silverman. For both writers, the film comments on the status of African slaves in America through the metaphor of the cyborgs. However, Aryan actors play the replicants. Silverman explains this decision as an attempt to accentuate the arbitrary nature that governs who gets chosen to be a slave and who ends up the master. Contradicting Silverman, Carr asserts that the use of a white body acts as a fetish to stave off recognition of white racial difference. Instead, he argues, the film lodges difference as an issue of species.[23] Both these fairly tortured explanations ignore how passing already calls into question our ability to register difference visually. It is the cyborgs' ability to pass as human that stimulates questions about how we define human. The issue is not why the actors playing the replicants are white (or human) but why or how we read them as white (or human).

*Blade Runner*'s narrative might be read as an artifact of its time except that nearly twenty years later *A.I.* returned to the same theme. The young protagonist, David, is the ultimate good cyborg. Prof. Hobby (William Hurt), author of the book *How Robots Can Become Human*, programs a cyborg to love only his mother, and he is given to a family with an ill son. However, when her biological son returns, she rejects David. From then on, David's fondest wish is to pass as human and return to his mother. The majority of the film is dedicated to David's search for the Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio*, who will turn him into a "real boy." Like *Blade Runner*, *A.I.* interrogates the distinctions between man and machine.[24] While *Blade Runner* proposes and then debunks the idea that morality and memory are the domain of the human, *A.I.* asks what happens when machines can love. At what point do they cross from object to subject, from, in the words of the film, Mecha to Orga? In a visually telling scene, David, in an attempt to be like his family's human son, eats spinach. It becomes lodged in David's machinery and must be cleaned out. However, unlike the Terminator or Ash in *Alien*, the revelation of David's inner workings does not reveal his nonhuman nature. The mechanics/doctors work on David's "stomach," and his mother comforts him by holding his hand. This creates a disturbing disjuncture between the machinery in David's body and the emotional bond between mother and son. To pass more successfully for human, David is given emotions, but these raise questions about the dividing line between man and machine.

In the end, both *Blade Runner* and *A.I.* retreat from the liberatory potential of the passing narrative. The good cyborg fails to achieve his dream of a boundless,

borderless future because it is caught in multiple layers of nostalgia. Inevitably, nostalgia and its close sister, melancholy, accompany the breakdown of borders, whether between human and machine, white and Other, or real and imaginary. As Valerie Rohy has argued in her essay "Displacing Desire," the act of passing creates the need for nostalgia: "If passing, then, invokes origins only to displace origins, the passing of the law itself is manifest in its nostalgia for a point of origin that, in fact, it has never known." Rohy links this nostalgia with the creation of an "individual or institution" identity based on the myth of origins.[25] The anxiety created by the destabilization of categories creates a void into which rushes a nostalgia for certainty and the real.

In attempting to pass for human, the replicants of *Blade Runner* are nostalgic for a nonexistent past. Rachael's memories are implanted, throwing her identity into question. What sort of self can one claim to have if one's experiences are not real? When Deckard begins to recite Rachael's private memories back to her, her face registers disbelief and horror. Deckard tells her, "Those aren't your memories; they're someone else's. They're Tyrell's niece's." Rachael's memories are mere imitations, repetitions. Yet the revelation that memories cannot function as an absolute referent does not destroy their aura.

Another replicant in *Blade Runner*, Leon (Brion James), risks being caught by a blade runner as he tries to retrieve his "precious photographs." He has no childhood, no past, so he cannot let go of the few pieces of the past that he has been able to collect. The camera work reinforces Leon's fetishization of his photographs by repeatedly panning slowly over them, accompanied by Vangelis's elegiac score.

Even the look of *Blade Runner* appears mired in a melancholy nostalgia. Bukatman describes the design of the film as, "a future in which the nostalgia for a simulacrum of history in the forms of the *film noir* (narratively) and forties fashion (diegetically) dominates."[26] While the film undermines the authenticity of memory as a basis for determining humanity, it mourns the loss of history and origin.

Nostalgia also suffuses *A.I.* The first half of the film establishes that Henry and Monica Swinton (Sam Robards and Frances O'Conner) have been devastated since their child became sick. Hoping to reconstitute the family, the father has recently brought home a cyborg son named David. After David is expelled from the family following the return of the family's biological son, David spends the rest of the film obsessively searching for a way back in. Paradoxically, he pursues reunification with his mother in order to recreate a relationship that never existed, since, during his time with the family, he always took second place to his parents' biological son. In one painful scene, David sits on the floor listening as his mother lies in bed reading the story of Pinocchio to his brother. He tells fellow Mecha Gigolo Joe (Jude Law):

> My Mommy doesn't hate me because I'm special and unique. Because there's never been anyone like me before. When I am real, Mommy's going to read to me, and tuck me in my bed, and sing to me, and listen to everything *I* say, and she will cuddle with me, and tell me every day, a hundred times a day, that she loves me.

David yokes together two seemingly disparate ideas: the desire to be special and unique and to "return" to an idealized source of origin. The two concepts are

inextricably linked. As Susan Stewart argues in her study of souvenirs and collecting, "Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity."[27] The constant search for origins inherent in nostalgia denies the horror of repetition, the series without a beginning. It is no wonder that nostalgia so persistently haunts these "good cyborgs." As Rohy argues, "Passing is an imitation to which there is no original."[28] Their attempts to pass raise the specter of repetition, so that these good cyborgs must continually return to the promise of origins.

In a scene toward the end of *A.I.*, David arrives at the building where he was manufactured and meets an identical cyborg boy. For the first time, David loses his eerie calm, picks up a lamp, and beats the other child, yelling, "I'm David. I'm special and unique." Dr. Hobby enters the room and tells David, "You are a real boy, at least as real as I've ever made one." In other words, the cyborg David is as real as the biological David. Or, given Dr. Hobby's caveat—"at least as real as I've ever made one"—the cyborg and the real are equal imitations.

Even the original David, Dr. Hobby's son, proves to be an unstable reference point. Dr. Hobby declares, "My son was real," but that David is now dead while the cyborg David lives and experiences. Which David is more real: the David who only inhabits the row of photographs lining a shelf or the cyborg who stands before the doctor? However, if David were to recognize that there is no "real" boy who lies behind the imitation, he also would have to acknowledge that there is no "real" boy he could become, and thus have to relinquish his nostalgic dream of family. After Dr. Hobby leaves, David finds a room filled with replicas, packed and ready to be shipped, and, unable to face the implications, he climbs onto a ledge and jumps in the water below.

As Stewart has argued, nostalgia is ideological. Although, or even because, boundaries are chaotically undermined, a breakdown of hierarchies does not follow naturally. Jean Baudrillard warns of the wages of nostalgia in his typically hyperbolic manner:

> When [the real] has totally disappeared, logically we will be under the total spell of power—a haunting memory already foreshadowed everywhere, manifesting itself at one and the same time as the satisfaction of having got rid of it (nobody wants it any more, everybody unloads it on others) and grieving its loss. Melancholy for societies without power: this has already given rise to fascism, that overdose of a powerful referential in a society which cannot terminate its mourning.[29]

The cyborgs' very existence threatens the status of the real; thus, in mourning the loss of the real, they shore up the "powerful referential" of the human. Despite the critical celebration afforded *Blade Runner*, humanness/whiteness remains a central organizing principle of its narrative. This explains the cyborgs' obsession with assimilation and passing. That they would rather be human is a given.

It is on this crucial point that *Blade Runner* and *A.I.* diverge most sharply from traditional passing narratives. While such narratives may be ripe for charges of racial self-hatred, the overwhelming majority of passing stories end, many critics have pointed out, with the hero or heroine rejecting white society in favor of an

African American community. This act of return serves as an implicit, and at times an explicit, critique of racist white America. The cyborgs in *Blade Runner* and *A.I.* do not have this as an option, making these films unrepentantly assimilationist. The four replicants who escape in *Blade Runner* give us the only hint of a cyborg community, but their alliance crumbles as they are picked off one by one. Rachael, in what may be the finest example of loving your oppressor, runs away with the reformed blade runner, Deckard.

In *A.I.*, even though David's mother urges him to "find others like you" to be safe, David pursues assimilation with humans until the last frame. He stubbornly maintains that human is equivalent to real, as opposed to the subjectivity of a cyborg, which is "fake." In the movie's rather bizarre coda, two thousand years have passed and aliens have found David. They enable him fantastically to recreate a single day with his mother. At the end of the day, David's mother tells him she loves him, and David finally becomes "real" through his acceptance into human society.[30] Even more chillingly, David fulfills his dream of being "special and unique" since all the other cyborgs, Orga and Mecha alike, have disappeared. Only through total annihilation of any sense of community can David realize his dream.

Critics rightfully celebrate the destabilization of categories in good cyborg movies. However, only by reading them through the language of racial passing is their ultimate capitulation to hierarchical relationships revealed.

**The Mulatto Cyborg.** Like the good cyborg, the mulatto cyborg lives in the chaotic spaces between organic and artificial. But unlike the good cyborg, the mulatto cyborg is stripped of romanticism and nostalgia. He mocks the liberal humanist invitation to pass as human. He cannot access the coherent identity promised by an embrace of the real, so he cobbles together the fragmentary self required of life in the imaginary.

The mulatto cyborg is rare in cyborg cinema, although one can catch glimpses of him in cyberpunk fiction and comic books. One of the most powerful incarnations appears in the film *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987).

*RoboCop* may seem like a strange choice for analysis, given the general level of disdain for the movie. Its cheesy, low-budget special effects, stilted dialogue, and gratuitous violence make it an easy target. It does not have the big-budget, artsy credentials of *A.I.* or *Alien*. The plot most closely resembles a B-movie rape-revenge fantasy, and it contains none of the complex time-travel paradoxes of *The Terminator* or the moral dilemmas of *Blade Runner*.

It is easy to ignore *RoboCop* in the deluge of writing on the other cyborg movies. The occasional critical analysis tends to lump it in with *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) as offering a techno-macho aesthetic. The cyborg's body is read as technological, masculinist armor against a crisis in white, male heterosexuality.[31] Such readings ignore the important ways in which, rather than shoring up the tatters of the Western ideal of the unitary self, *RoboCop* offers a counternarrative.

Instead of suppressing hybridity or retreating from it, as the bad cyborg and good cyborg do respectively, the mulatto cyborg in *RoboCop* unflinchingly confronts

Figure 1. The mulatto cyborg in Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* unflinchingly confronts and exposes hybridity. (Orion Pictures, 1987).

and exposes hybridity. RoboCop is the reconstruction of good-guy policeman Murphy (Peter Weller). Murphy is ambushed while on duty, and the gigantic corporation that runs the Detroit Police Department turns him into a cyborg supercop. He is nearly unrecognizable in his metal armor and helmet. For the first two-thirds of the film, RoboCop takes orders from the corporation, but once fragmented memories of his former life begin to surface, he leaves the police station to pursue his attackers.

A crucial scene takes place soon after his memories start to return. RoboCop/Murphy and his partner (Nancy Allen) hide out in a concrete factory, and Murphy decides to remove his helmet. He tells his partner, "You may not like what you're going to see," preparing both the character and the audience for the jarring sight of Murphy's face attached to a robotic apparatus at the back of his skull. The image is graphically and purposely grotesque, and, as an object of horror, it recalls other boundary violations. In her study of the "new mestiza," Gloria Anzaldúa describes a hermaphrodite in her neighborhood as she was growing up, "They called her half and half, *mitá y mitá*, neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrified, a work of nature inverted."[32] This moment of repulsion inspired the title of the earlier section of this article, a reference to the spaghetti western *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966). The mulatto cyborg replaces the ugly cyborg of this triumvirate, yet ugly he remains since he personifies the horror of the half and half. This ugliness does not inspire shame, for

Murphy's partner responds to the unveiling by saying, "It's good to see you again, Murphy." Once Murphy removes his helmet, he never dons it again, preventing the soothing illusion of wholeness. Murphy is barred from passing as human and refuses to pass as machine, and with that refusal he takes his first steps away from nostalgia and melancholy.

Cynthia Fuchs explicates the scene described above as follows: "This masculine body agonizes over the dissolution of boundaries which results in a specific loss of manhood," thus "simultaneously meat and matrix, RoboCop is manifold, charged up, violently dislocated from himself."[33] Yet who is this "self" from whom RoboCop/Murphy is supposedly alienated? Fuchs implies that his human identity is his "real" identity and that his cyborg identity is at best an inadequate substitute and at worst nonexistent. While the narrative movement of the film may encourage the audience to experience the pathos of the moment, Peter Weller's acting in this scene is particularly affectless, even cold. RoboCop can only be described as "agonized" or "violently dislocated" by the realization that a human identity is of central importance. Yes, RoboCop/Murphy realizes that he has a past to which he can never return, since he asks what happened to his family, but his response is only a sad "I can feel them, but I can't remember them," in sharp contrast to the explosive response he has to almost every other incident in the movie.

RoboCop's/Murphy's subjectivity most closely resembles that of Anzaldúa's celebrated *mestiza*, who rejects any essentialist or reductionist singular identity. She traces this figure's emergence to the border between two cultures: "Thus people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes. Such is the case with the *india* and the *mestiza*."[34] While Anzaldúa acknowledges the melancholy of a borderline life, she also valorizes embracing an identity that straddles multiple cultures, sexualities, histories, and alliances. Thus, while Anzaldúa still yearns for transcendence and a connection to a mythical tradition, RoboCop has relinquished even the dream of return.

Despite RoboCop's resemblance to the *mestiza*, valorization of the human over the machine infuses a great deal of the literature on the film. Telotte claims RoboCop gradually moves away from his robot self toward reclaiming his human self, although Telotte quotes director Verhoeven's explanation that RoboCop/Murphy displays an "acceptance of what he has become, of having less and having more. He has taken control of what they have done to him, becoming Murphy again, *but in a new way*." Telotte does not seem to take the director seriously, arguing that RoboCop/Murphy demonstrates "a human identity that refuses to dissolve into artifice."[35] I would argue that the opposite is true. RoboCop/Murphy exemplifies a human identity that is intimately wedded to artifice. He has no essential or pure identity located in the real. When RoboCop/Murphy first removes his helmet, he looks in a fragment of reflective metal and touches his face with the tips of his mechanized fingers. Even his sense of his own face is mediated through his robot sensibility.

Unlike the bad cyborg, RoboCop, the mulatto cyborg, is not a man split off from a machine. There is no battle between his mechanical self and his "true"

human self. When he removes his helmet, he unmasks his robotic exterior and reveals the hybrid beneath; there is neither an essential biological self that must be recovered nor a robot self to defeat. He can neither escape his techno body to "return" to disembodied memory nor mourn the prelapsarian origin that would authenticate his identity. By leaving the interface between skin and metal exposed, RoboCop/Murphy makes passing as either human or machine impossible.

RoboCop cannot be swayed by nostalgia for his former, human identity since all he has are fragmentary remains. As Stewart argues, "By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative."[36] Memories come back to RoboCop as short video clips, so that his human experiences are processed through his current technology. Even more important, these fragments never cohere. There is no possibility of a simulated "return" to a more complete and authentic past. While the denial of nostalgia in *RoboCop* might be read as cynicism, and often is, I would argue that it is merely a rejection of Romantic ideals of transcendence and purity.

If we read the cyborg as a parallel construction of mixed-race representations, then *RoboCop* offers a view of multiraciality that does not fall back on retrograde visions of biological racial differences. The film escapes the trap of defining mixed race as the corruption of once pure and unadulterated races. Nor does the film privilege human/white identity, since there is no single source of authority and authenticity for that identity. Ultimately, it is the mulatto cyborg, chaotic, ironic, without nostalgia or origin, that promises a future of mixed-race subjectivity.

## Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in Mark Poster, ed., *Selected Writings* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 168.
2. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
3. Jennifer González, "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research," in Chris Hables Gray, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 540–51.
4. Isabel C. Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 111.
5. I use the term "mulatto" advisedly. "Mulatto" was, and sometimes still is, a derogatory term, deriving from an unflattering comparison to a mule, the sterile offspring of a horse and a donkey. By calling this article "The Mulatto Cyborg," I wish to invoke the use of the term in early American fictions of passing. Furthermore, I want to yoke together a term that recalls the highly technical posthuman and one that retains the sense of a physical, racialized, politicized body.
6. J. P. Telotte, *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).
7. Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New York: Ungar, 1987).
8. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 103.
9. Forest Pyle makes the case for a subgenre of science fiction that focuses on the cyborg. He characterizes the films as "distinctly dystopian in tone and premise. They

are unsettled and unsettling speculations on the border that separate the humans and non-humans." Pyle, "Making Cyborgs, Making Humans," in David Bell and Barbara Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 124.

10. Early in Carey's career, she was plagued by unconfirmed rumors of a mixed-race heritage; these reports were never confirmed or denied. Once Carey divorced Svengali producer/husband Tommy Mottola, she began recording with African American artists. This fueled more rumors until the *Los Angeles Times* reported that her long-absent father was indeed African American.

11. See Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998); Annette Kuhn, ed., *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (New York: Verso, 1990); and Michael Shapiro, "'Manning' the Frontiers: The Politics of (Human) Nature in *Blade Runner*," in Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka, eds., *The Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 65–84.

12. I refer here to the notion of "racial formation" formulated by Michael Omi and Howard Winant. They assert that race is not a biological fact but an ideology that arises at the intersection of social, economic, and political forces. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s through the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

13. Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

14. Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 17.

15. Although the term "posthumanism" was in use before Katherine Hayles's writing on the topic (see Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, eds., *Posthuman Bodies* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995], I am most indebted to Hayles's discussions. She writes,

> My dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity. Hayles, *How We Became Post-Human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatrics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

16. Pyle, "Making Cyborgs, Making Humans," 129.

17. La Malinche is a quasihistorical figure similar to the mythical version of Pocahantas made popular through children's stories. La Malinche is a woman who entered into a romantic relationship with a conquistador and helped him in his colonial project. She is alternately viewed as a romantic or a race traitor.

18. Constance Penley, "Time, Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia," in John Tagg, ed., *The Cultural Politics of "Postmodernism"* (Binghamton: Department of Art and Art History, State University of New York: 1989), 33–49, and Penley, "Introduction," in Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom, eds., *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

19. Pyle, "Making Humans," 128.

20. Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 15.

21. Ibid., 21–22.

22. Elaine Ginsberg, ed., "Introduction," *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.
23. Brian Carr, "At the Threshold of the 'Human': Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Replication of Imperial Memory," *Cultural Critique* 39 (1998): 119–50, and Kaja Silverman, "Back to the Future," *Camera Obscura* 27 (1991): 109–32.
24. There is a great deal of writing on *Blade Runner*'s blurring of boundaries. See Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*; Shapiro, "'Manning' the Frontiers"; and Kuhn, *Alien Zone*.
25. Valerie Rohy, "Displacing Desire: Passing, Nostalgia, and *Giovanni's Room*," in Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, 228, 229.
26. Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 131.
27. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.
28. Rohy, "Displacing Desire," 226.
29. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 181.
30. David's "realness" is called into question even in this scene, since his day with his mother is made possible through genetic engineering, mind scans, and a fair amount of scientific mumbo-jumbo on the part of the scriptwriter. Nevertheless, these moments provide emotional closure for the film and give it an ending that is not within the larger reality of the movie.
31. See discussions by Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, and Cynthia Fuchs, "'Death Is Irrelevant': Cyborgs, Reproduction, and the Future Male Hysteria," in Gray, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook*, 281–99.
32. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).
33. Fuchs, "'Death Is Irrelevant,'" 284, 285.
34. Anzaladúa, *Borderlands*, 37.
35. Telotte, *Replications*, 155, 156; emphasis added.
36. Stewart, *On Longing*, 24.